

Plan in progress: A critique of the selective coproduction of the Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders (Belgium)

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, so-called coproductive, radical strategic planning has become a synonym for integrative and holistic public sector-led planning processes and the alleged integrating qualities of representative democracies. However, these views remain framed by the specific discourses, perspectives and path dependencies of governments, obstructing opportunities for radical reorientations as intended above. In this paper, we want to illustrate how these restrained views affect concrete planning practices through the specific case of the region of Flanders (Belgium).

For decades, the holistic model of the Dutch neighbours has largely inspired planning dynamics in Flanders (Belgium). As such, in 1997, most concerned Flemish authorities accepted the first overarching spatial policy plan for the region. Fifteen years later, however, original commitments have eroded and the original plan has largely lost its credibility. In 2011 a new process was launched, aiming to develop a new policy plan (the future Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders). However, this new process builds only limited support and credibility outside the select group of involved actors. We argue that today in Flanders the borrowed methodology of coproductive planning is insufficiently adapted to the institutional context and is therefore mainly delivering an aura of sustainability optimism to on-going policies, while a variety of spatial developments that are recognized as fundamental or problematic are omitted from the debate.

We show this by putting forward some major missing pieces, which are located in the policy fields of large road infrastructure development, “legacy” suburbanization, retail siting, and property taxation. We show that these issues are representative of a number of constraints that are imposed by separate policy levels (located at other ministries, at the federal level, or in neighbouring regions such as Brussels) although these are not accounted for by the current planning process, apart from a number of key issues that are kept deliberately outside the process after labelling these “already decided”.

Finally, we sketch some opportunities for improvement, consisting of developing a more contextualized process model, putting the stress on more concrete planning issues, involving independent stakeholders in strategic alliances, and taking a co-evolutionary approach from the start.

1 MOTIVE

From the 1980s onwards, planners have become aware that they operate in fuzzy, networked and splintered reality in multi-scalar and multi-actor contexts (Dupuy 1991, Graham and Marvin, 2001). Ever since, planning literature has moved from techno- or sociocratic ideas, engaging with the increasing complexities of socio-spatial systems. Fresh and novel ideas on planning have emerged from theories on regional regimes (Stone, 1989; Mossberger and Stoker, 2000; Hamilton, 2004), collaborative governance (Innes, 1995;

Healey, 1997), relational geographies (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006), and other positions. They have addressed the increasing fragmentation of spatial development, the issue of self-organisation and the need for more socio-economically resilient development; the radical reorganization of the state; and the overriding challenge of integrated governance, coordinating disparate policy actors across physical and thematic boundaries. Many questions have been raised about the competence and expertise of planners (Lovering, 2009) and their accountability at the same time (Purcell, 2008). The outcome of these new perspectives has been a reorientation of much of the academic discourse repositioning planning practice away from a technical applied science concerned with fixed plan- and decision-making, within an exclusive government domain. Instead, planning is now recognised to be dealing with a much more uncertain and nonlinear world, requiring a combination of technical, political and communicational approaches, the creation of new institutional and governance settings, and a wider portfolio of tools beyond “the plan” (Boelens, 2009).

But this evolution is by no means universal. The socio- and technocratic views of planning remain dominant conceptions in much practice and teaching in Europe and elsewhere. Even protagonists of the so-called “coproductive, radical strategic planning” persist in integrative and holistic public sector-led planning processes and the alleged integrating qualities of representative democracies (Albrechts, 2010; Oosterlynck et al., 2010). Although process managers often favour an open dialogue on a basis of equivalency, without prior conditions or restrictions, and although it is usually acknowledged that in the on-going multi-scalar and multi-actor society, also organisations other than governments could take the initiative, the public sector remains the dominant or key actor for alleged “obvious reasons” (Albrechts, 2012, p.7; Hajer, 2011). These views remain framed by the specific discourses, perspectives and path dependencies of governments, obstructing opportunities for radical reorientations as intended above (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). As a result, the transition towards more adaptive, co-evolutionary and actor-relational approaches remain one-sided and a growing gap occurs between planning and the spatial ambitions and interests in the daily multi-actor practice of a networked society.

In this contribution, we want to illustrate how these restrained views affect concrete planning practices. We will focus on a specific case of the regional government of Flanders, Belgium, which takes the above mentioned collaborative, coproductive strategic planning paradigm very seriously in the current process towards a new Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders (“Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen in Dutch”, hereafter BRV). We will show how this is turning into a self-fulfilling empty process, leaving a number of real developments in and around Belgian society, and in other realms of the competent administrations, completely aside.

For that purpose we will first go into the specific context of Flemish planning and show how the present proceedings are also mortgaged by the perhaps too pretentious preceding Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (“Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen in Dutch”, hereafter RSV, of 1997) in institutional and actor-relational terms. These historical and institutional contexts prove to be conditional to understand the present setting of Flemish planning. Next we will illustrate how the present planning processes with regard to BRV slowly but surely evolves into an exclusive communicative strategy, as the result of the aforementioned focus on coproductive planning. In this respect it misses major discourses and developments, which are going on in other parts of the Flemish-Belgian society and administration. We will describe some of these major missing pieces in a subsequent section of this paper. Finally we will come up with an alternative, which could take these missing pieces and adjoining self-reliant complex developments seriously, towards a more resilient process of “becoming”. We will conclude what this would mean for the interaction between planning theory and practice in more general terms.

2 BELGIAN PLANNING: AN INTRODUCTION

In Belgium, the development of the discipline of spatial planning is usually associated with the promulgation of the first law on urban planning, in 1962. This law was the basis for a regulatory system that provided for the development of national zoning plans that eventually would cover the whole territory of Belgium. In parallel with the preparation of these national zoning plans (in Dutch: “gewestplannen”, and in French: “plans de secteur”) in the period 1967-1975, planning grew to the discipline it is today. The development of the discipline was accompanied by the installation of various academic programs, the establishment of a number of specialized consultants and a significant growth of the number of competent civil servants at the various administrative levels (Allaert, 2009, p. 122-125). This image, however, ignores the existence of a much older, traditional practice of urbanism that focused mainly on urban aesthetics, urban development and post-war reconstruction. This discipline of urbanism was mainly practiced in the larger cities and was driven by architects trained in academies of arts. During the 19th century this left its mark on smaller and larger urban development projects such as the rehabilitation of the city centre of Brussels (Lagrou, 2000). Apart from these interventions of grand urbanism, Belgium’s history also shows the rise of large works of civil engineering. From a spatial-economic perspective, these had much more impact on spatial development than the strictly urbanist interventions in the inner cities, although dating from the same period. We are talking primarily about the construction of the railway and canal networks in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which were in the post-war period supplemented with the construction of the motorways and the development of large-scale industrial estates, including port areas (Ryckewaert, 2011).

Nonetheless, the type of planning that was introduced by the law of 1962 included a major economic development component too. Prior to the drafting of the national zoning plans, regional policy plans were prepared, which were based on a combination of survey, demographic and economic growth forecasts. Furthermore politically-driven vision elements aimed at underpinning the zoning was eventually put down in the plans. However, and in particular for future residential areas and industrial areas, usually spacious demarcations were defined. In many municipalities, the process was accompanied with intense debates, which were often dominated by the interests of land owners. The specific views of businesses, chambers of commerce, regional development agencies, local nature, landscape and heritage organizations and actors working in community development and urban renewal acted upon the process. Next to that, and apart from these consultation processes and political decision-making, the national zoning plans were also the subject of fraudulent manipulation, which entailed various judicial investigations in the 1980s (Timmerman, 1997).

However, among the involved actors, and subsequently in the planners community as it had evolved in the decades after the promulgation of the law of 1962, a certain resentment occurred especially about the slowness of the decision-making process on the zoning plans. In Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, it took until 1980, and in Wallonia, the southern part, even until 1987 before all of these zoning plans (consisting of dozens of map sheets) were approved. Since then, Belgium got its legislative spatial plans covering the entire territory. Nonetheless, for decades local governments could still deviate from the national plans, for instance by drafting municipal zoning plans, and by issuing allotment permits in areas that were not designated for housing according to the national zoning plan. As a consequence, for a long period, the steering power of this plans was rather limited. Another frequently heard criticism was that the plans had been too generous in providing residential areas and zones for residential expansion, failing to discourage housing development in remote municipalities (Lepers and Morelle, 2008; Halleux et al., 2012). This form of legitimate

suburbanization and scattered residential development led to an increase of the share of built-up land (Poelmans and Van Rompaey, 2009), an additional incentive for long-distance commuting and car use, and many non-internalized costs in terms of utility infrastructure, distribution and water supply and treatment.

3 FROM BELGIUM TO FLANDERS: A MORE AMBITIOUS PLANNING DISCOURSE

In 1980 the second Belgian state reform delegated responsibilities for spatial planning to the three regional governments. Since then, the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Capital Region have developed their own spatial policies that are today largely independent from those in the other two regions. This independent position was supported by the simultaneous regionalization of the competences of environment and housing. However, it took until the third state reform (1988-1989) before the in budgetary terms important ministry of public works (manager of the road network, the waterways, the ports, the airports, the coastal protection system, and ultimately a large share of the public bus and tram network) was subdivided over the regions too, although jurisdiction over the land registry and taxation, the railways and a major part of energy policies have remained federal matter to this day.

Despite this fragmentation of competences across various administrative levels, in the Flemish regional government the department of spatial planning developed the ambition to play a more coordinating role. This vision was manifest in numerous policy documents and studies that were prepared in the build-up for a new, overarching spatial policy plan in the period 1992-1997 (Albrechts et al., 2003). Throughout this process, in which spatial planning developed as a discipline at the regional scale level, it appeared that inspiration was systematically imported from the Netherlands, whose reputation in planning matters was almost mythical at the time (Faludi and Van der Valk, 1994; Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000). Although the semantics was revised and a new terminology was developed based on the British concept of structure planning, the general pattern was highly recognizable. Structure planning was introduced as a modern method for policy development, and the role of the regional government was reinforced by the introduction of an overarching spatial policy plan.

This RSV (1997) was perceived as a model of sustainable development planning. It issued a number of clear instructions towards the subordinate levels of government (provinces and municipalities). The plan mandated that the urban areas in Flanders should be demarcated by means of an urban growth boundary, wherein at least 60% of the additional houses and 80% of the additional industrial estates should be located. The RSV also contained surface targets for the main kinds of land use, pursuing an area increase of land designated as nature and forest with 48,000 ha, a standstill of the area designated as residential, an increase of industrial and recreational land and the elimination of 56,000 ha of agricultural land (RSV, 2004, p. 547). Furthermore, a number of assignments were imposed on the subordinate provincial government level, aiming to allocate the necessary space for additional housing and industrial estates. In 1999, the provinces and municipalities received by decree the assignment to draft a structure plan for their own territory, to be approved by the Flemish regional government. The adoption of such a structure plan would lead to greater autonomy of the municipality in drafting local zoning plans (thus substituting parts of the regional, formerly national, zoning plans) and to issue construction permits.

Characteristic for the ambitious objectives of this Flemish spatial policy is the discrepancy with what happened meanwhile in Wallonia, the southern part of Belgium. In this region, the existing system of regional, formerly national, zoning plans was maintained. Although also here a regional vision document was developed ("schéma de développement de l'espace régional" or SDER, approved in 1998), this plan contained little or no steering for the subordinate government levels. In Wallonia too, the municipalities were offered the option of

drafting their own structure plan (“schéma de structure communal”), but by the voluntary nature of these initiatives, in 2012 only 60 out of 262 municipalities possessed an approved plan. In Flanders, in contrast, in 2012, nearly all 308 municipalities have such a plan approved. The Walloon region appears considerably less ambitious to expand the discipline of spatial planning towards a coordinating field of government intervention, and has thus adopted a system that is much closer to French than to Dutch planning practice.

4 THE WEAKENING OF THE PLANNING DISCOURSE THROUGH AN OUTDATED RSV

The drafting of the zoning plans took place in a period of backlash against the rapid industrialization and the consequent construction of large-scale traffic infrastructures and colonization of the landscape. Although the construction of the railway network and the major canals was largely realized by the early 1970s, the construction of motorways, ring roads, seaports and subway tunnels was still on speed. Moreover, the first UN environmental conference in 1972 is indicative of the emergence of a societal debate about environmental issues. Furthermore, the economic recession that was initiated by the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 may also have helped to reduce the resistance towards more restrictive spatial policies. On the other hand, quite a few forecasts that led to optimistic estimates of spatial needs for additional dwellings were based on growth figures from the economically prosperous 1960s.

The zoning plan drafting process contributed to the creation of a societal basis for the incorporation of spatial development in a global vision. This is illustrated by the fact that the overarching status of the zoning plans were acknowledged by, among others, the ministry of public works, meaning that motorways and major engineering works could only be carried out if these were included in the zoning plan, or, otherwise, if the zoning plan first went through a rather cumbersome amendment procedure including a public review stage. Developments in the field of basic democratic decision-making and participation also played a role here. In rapidly urbanizing Flanders with its silting open space, developing projects without broad public participation became increasingly less obvious.

With the approval of the RSV in 1997 and the new decrees in 1996 and 1999, policy makers continued on this track. The formalized method of public participation from structure planning practice was introduced as an innovative technique (Massey and Cordey-Hayes, 1971), although in the UK it was already heavily criticized before being abolished at all in 2004. The adoption of the RSV brought a certain momentum, resulting in a rising number of municipalities, the larger cities, and the provincial governments eager to start their own structure planning process. Also the Flemish government itself initially showed great courage to start working on the demarcation processes of the urban areas (Boussauw et al., 2012) and planning for nature, forest and agriculture in the countryside (Van Gossum et al., 2008). However, it took only a few years before the weak points of the RSV rose to the surface. Although the plan was regarded by all levels of government as well as by many stakeholders as future-oriented, sustainable and ambitious, quite a few policy objectives proved to be incompatible with the institutional context. The fact that the plan was part of the strategy of the Flemish government to obtain a stronger position in the new Belgian state structure may partly explain this. The objectives of the RSV did not sufficiently take into account institutional constraints outside the policy realm of planning, and especially not those situated at the other levels of government, not least at the federal jurisdiction.

About five years after the RSV's adoption the first signs of a sort of planning fatigue could be noticed: smaller municipalities, or rather conservative municipal councils, experienced the requirements by higher-level governments as an additional administrative burden. Therefore, the most recently elaborated municipal spatial structure plans are often based on rush work. Furthermore the demarcation of urban areas encountered many difficulties, and because of local political interests it was apparently not feasible to locate the majority of additional

housing effectively inside the urban growth boundaries. The most striking example is the demarcation line around the Brussels agglomeration, which eventually was turned into a tool to confine the population growth of the Brussels agglomeration inside its administrative borders instead of facilitating organized development by means of an urban growth boundary (Boussauw et al., 2012). Also the planning activity for nature, forest and agriculture was a drawn-out process, which struggled to find a sufficiently large societal basis, inter alia because of the rapid expansion of hobby farming as an important new consumer of open space that was not taken into account by the RSV (Bomans et al., 2010). Another important element is that the planning of large-scale public works has slowly but surely been detached from spatial planning processes, an evolution that started as early as 1999, when, in contrast with previous terms of office, the public works department was no longer assigned to the minister of spatial planning.

5 ROOM FOR HOPE? THE NEW SPATIAL POLICY PLAN FOR FLANDERS

The planning decree of 1996 stipulated that the RSV should be revised after ten years. In 2007, however, the competence for spatial planning was assigned to a liberal-conservative regional minister who together with the Christian democratic government partners decided that the review was not a priority given the fact that some objectives of the current RSV were still the subject of a series of arduous decision-making processes. It took until 2011 before an initiative was taken for the preparation of a new plan, under the project name "Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders" or BRV. Following the discourse that was introduced by the RSV, and following the new ideas on coproductive planning mentioned before, the course of drafting the BRV grafted onto a broadly conceived community consultation process. The outlined process was designed to follow the standardized European-administrative course of Green Papers and White Papers. In order to shape the funnelling process leading from a general to a more specific vision, almost the entire formally organized civil society and a selection of academics were invited to contribute with sincere advice in dozens of workshops and meetings.

In May 2012, the Green Paper on spatial policy in Flanders (Groenboek Ruimte, 2012; Fig. 1) was the first interim report that was made available to the public as a discussion document. Despite the proactive approach, the rather large budget that was made available and the provided time span of more than three years (from early 2011 to mid-2014), however, the conducted process only grasped part of the whole of on-going, self-reliant societal developments with a spatial impact.

A part of the problem is to be found in the composition of the stakeholder teams. Almost all participants in the process are professional representatives of the summoned civil society organizations, which in most cases are paid with public funds in order to participate. Also the attending academics and consultants usually have an interest in their presence because of their visibility in the process. On the other hand, representatives of the private sector, including manufacturing and service industry, are virtually absent. This is also the case regarding officials of federal or neighbouring regional institutions and the larger municipalities, such as Antwerp or Ghent. Besides, there is an imbalance in participation among the stakeholders considered as representatives of various civil society organizations and the academic experts, because of their spatially differentiated knowledge of the planning object.

Another inadequacy is that the process does not foresee room for a quantitative section, neither in an analytical sense, nor in eventually stated policy objectives (Groenboek Ruimte, 2012, p. 10). The fact that there is virtually no role for technical support by decision support systems or quantitative research means that the managers of the process a priori take a post-positivist position. By only involving the presumed expertise within the assembled teams

of actors in the definition of the planning object, actually a biased approach is organized. This means that the planning discourse that was created by the momentum of the RSV today has initiated a supposedly participatory process with a planning object that is mentally constructed by a select group of attendees, and did not meet the self-reliant and complex needs, ambitions and developments that are going on in present day Flemish society.

In practice this means that a range of societal developments that are currently under way and are at odds with the discourse of the BRV interim documents, are missed completely. As such, the debate that will eventually lead to the intended policy plan may become a transcript of a construct reality - i.e. the reality about which the involved select group of included actors reached a consensus - while in the real world it will have lost its interface with everyday practice of political short term decision-making and self-reliant developments. The high frequency with which meetings and workshops are organized contributes to the development of an own planning discourse, which is supported by the team, but which is exclusively determined by the dynamics, knowledge and attitudes that have been a priori present among the team members themselves. This configuration can be considered as post-political in the sense that the planning process first and foremost manages to rally actors around themes in which they are able to find a broad consensus (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). This unbalanced composition of the actor teams leads to coproduction about self-fulfilling themes, which obviously undermines the authority of the process itself. Therefore, in parallel with the process, lobbyists mainly representing the "hard" sectors continuously proceed to the ministerial cabinets, convinced that these actions would be more useful than spending their time in the actor teams. In this way, the status of the process and the credibility of the planning department as a policy maker erode, while the ambition to develop an overarching planning system becomes idle.¹

The recently published Green Paper is structured around three strategic themes: "metropolitan presence as a strong ambition", "diversity with a human dimension", and "from recalcitrant to resilient space". Further in the document, interpretation is given to these metaphorical slogans by way of eleven so-called key issues, which are clustered around broad societal themes such as globalization, population growth, climate, energy, mobility, innovation and ecology and food. The way the themes are presented reveals a compelling project, aiming to create a strong vision that will influence a wide range of policy areas, which often do not belong to spatial planning in the strict sense of the Belgian political-administrative structures. The high-profile media campaign that accompanied the announcement of the first public consultation round in the context of the Green Paper was therefore little modest and managed to visualize the process metaphors in a spectacular way (Fig. 1).

¹ In this respect, it is ironic that just at the time that the Flemish government refers implicitly or explicitly to the Dutch model when shaping and communicating its own spatial policy, the Dutch government has committed to a downsizing of their own spatial planning department by breaking up and abolishing the famous Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (in Dutch: VROM). In the press, while justifying this decision, the responsible Dutch minister even referred to Belgian planning practice as an example of bottom-up approach and self-initiative.

Fig. 1. Sample from the BRV communication campaign (Clockwise: “Venice of the North?”, “Agriculture at a higher level?”, “New opportunities for nature?”, “Solution for congestion?”)



6 A FEW MISSING PIECES

As such, the metaphors and vague concepts used throughout the process - which appear to be specific manifestations of universal contemporary themes such as sustainability, resilience and climate change - contribute to the creation of a staged forum where topics that are open for discussion have been selected in advance, and from which actors with clearly conflicting interests are excluded (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). The abundant use of figurative language in the interim planning documents leads to rather abstract process results. Consequently, the discrepancy with the parallel planning objects as perceived by the political decision-makers at the various government levels (in this case mainly the Flemish and federal government, but also the councils of the provinces and larger municipalities) increases. Based on a critical approach to the BRV planning process in relation to the numerous, mostly neo-liberally inspired, parallel decision-making processes that are currently

on-going, it must be acknowledged that a whole series of important developments, that are related to planning and location policy, are systematically excluded from the BRV process. We point to several developments that do not come under the political-administrative structure of the Flemish Region, or are deliberately housed in a department which is not part of the intentionally transparent and well-communicated BRV process.² Speaking more bluntly, our hypothesis is that the BRV process also serves as a means to divert attention from what is happening in real life. Because meanwhile, the bulldozers have started their engines and several major developments and discussions are hardly touched upon in the BRV, although having an important and often unsustainable expected impact on the spatial structure of the region. This undermines the credibility and the momentum of the BRV process altogether.

6.1 In the Wake of the RSV

Firstly, striking ignorance is noticed with regard to a robust evaluation and interpretation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the current plan; i.e. the RSV. Although the objective to build at least 60% of all new dwellings inside the demarcation lines of the urban areas was upheld in the first years of the RSV (1997), the partial revision of the plan in 2004 already weakened the objective by reducing the target to approximately 54% (Voets et al., 2010; RSV, 2004, p. 405), which corresponded better to a trend-following course equivalent to an extrapolation of the existing situation. An additional degree that left little over of the original intentions of the RSV was the adoption of the decree on land and building policy in 2009 (Winters, 2012), which made housing development on yet undeveloped land easier when it was part of a social housing policy. Furthermore, also the Flemish way to treat the urban area around Brussels evolved against the original spirit of the RSV. Instead of establishing the urban growth boundary that was foreseen by the RSV and was intended to steer the growth of the Brussels agglomeration in a planned manner, the eventual demarcation plan expressed an anti-urban policy with the countering of Frenchification in the urban fringe of Brussels as a new underlying objective (Boussauw et al., 2012).

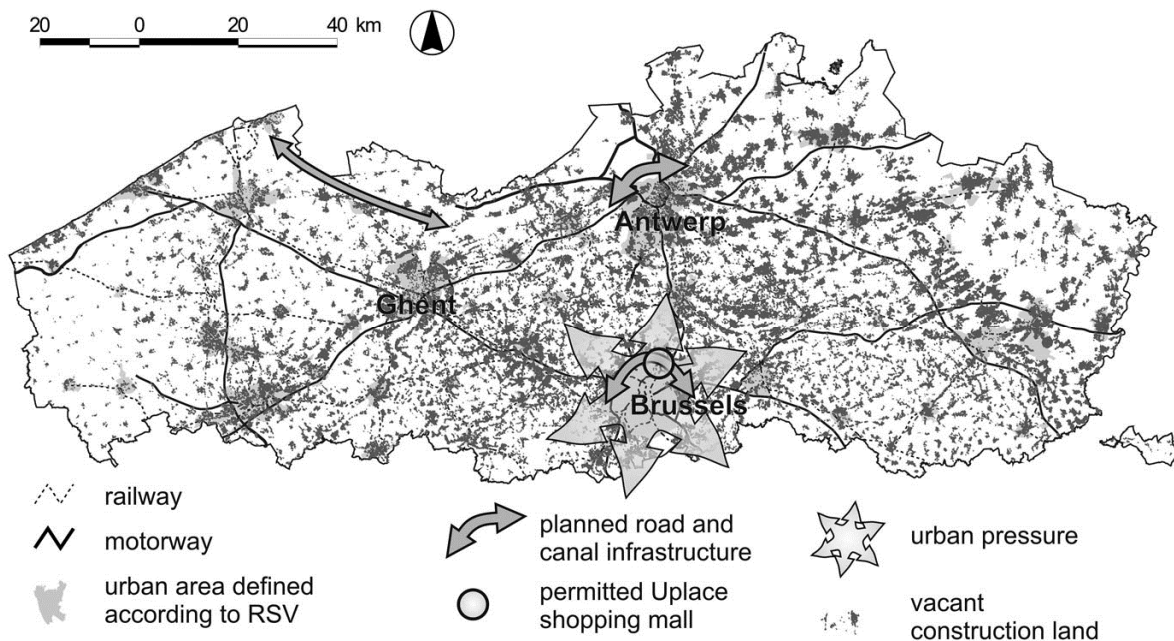
In parallel, the Flemish government left room for numerous more or less stealthy decision-making processes, which mainly revolved around large-scale infrastructure. Examples include the planning of new road infrastructure around Antwerp, a new canal between the ports of Ghent and Zeebrugge, or the expansion of the Brussels ring road. These processes are not managed by the Flemish planning administration, but by the departments of infrastructure and environment. These departments are responsible for environmental impact assessment procedures, which are slowly but surely taking over the role of spatial planning processes although these usually not meeting the requirements of participatory planning as promoted by the RSV or the BRV interim documents.

Furthermore, quite a few more or less spontaneous developments, legacies of the old zoning plans, or planned but not yet implemented infrastructure projects are kept outside the Green Paper in a subtle way. In some cases this happens spontaneously, for instance when the considered development does not fall under the competence of the Flemish Region, or when the responsible administration within the Flemish government is far away from the policy area of spatial planning. In some other cases, developments are considered already decided policy, and are therefore no longer in question. Also, some issues are beforehand considered incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity, which delegates powers as much as possible

² For a number of neoliberally oriented Flemish ministers, under the aegis of the regional premier, pursuing an expansionary economic policy attributing an important role for livability threatening logistics activities, this seems a perfect course. While a variety of large-scale infrastructure projects are allocated to the budget, measures against urban sprawl are over again postponed (De Decker, 2011), while the BRV process is preaching sustainability, small-scale development and climate policy.

to the municipalities. Below we summarize some of these elements, for which we mainly rely on news reports and sources within administration and politics. A cartographic overview is given in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Cartographic overview of a sample of spatial aspects that are neglected in the BRV process



6.2 New Road Infrastructure

In 1998, the Flemish government decided that in Antwerp a third fixed link across the Scheldt river would be built, on order to “close” the main ring road. In the next decade, a spontaneous debate ensued between supporters and opponents of a bridge, a tunnel, or the new connection at all (Proost et al., 2005). Anno 2012 the plans had been revised several times, but particularly within the city of Antwerp itself there was no consensus on the appropriateness of a new river crossing. The debate on the expansion of the Brussels ring came later, but probably follows the same course since the results of environmental impact assessments by the Flemish government are disputed by the Brussels regional government. Regularly emerging disagreements between the public works department and environmental organizations on the impact of additional road infrastructure on induced traffic and processes of suburbanization (Baum-Snow, 2007) were initially not acknowledged by the managing authorities.

Meanwhile, a number of motorways have been systematically enlarged by constructing additional lanes, again with a significant expected impact on spatial dynamics. However, the mentioned infrastructure developments are out of the scope of the BRV process, while for the smaller interventions, i.e. enlargement projects, even no organized public participation is provided beyond adjacent property owners. Without going into further detail, the BRV deliberations show similar misfits with regard to a number of hydraulic engineering works, such as a possible canal connection between Zeebrugge and Ghent.

A related issue is road pricing, which is, according to urban economics theory, often considered as an effective alternative for setting up urban growth boundaries or other restrictions on suburban development, as an excellent tool for reducing congestion and using the available infrastructure in a more efficient way, limiting the supply of cars in urban areas and thus tackling livability issues (Brueckner, 2007). Although this is recognized in a number of policy letters of Flemish ministers, stating that the introduction of road pricing will be assessed soon, this debate has been carefully kept outside the BRV process. The formal reason for this is that this issue belongs together with the construction of road infrastructure to the policy area of public works, and thus not to the planning department.

6.3 Legacy Suburbanization

The zones that were designated in the original zoning plans as residential areas or as residential expansion areas, are numerous and included in 2009 still more than 300,000 vacant plots (Loris, 2011). This means that these may catch the expected demographic developments of the next decades, even without any new policy measures. At the time of drafting the zoning plans, local mayors found it important to provide in ample future construction land in their municipality. In this way, landowners could be pleased, since their property gained in value, and population growth could be facilitated, which was expected to contribute to the financial position and the dominance of the municipality through additionally received property taxes. In the zoning plans, most of the newly designated undeveloped residential areas were located in the suburban and rural municipalities. These vacant residential areas were filled in over the years, first in or near the agglomerations, but over time also in the more remote locations. Today it are the most remote municipalities that still have an ample stock of undeveloped residential land, and have consequently become a major destination for a significant part of domestic migration flows. This form of organized suburbanization contributes to an increase in commuting distances, congestion, inefficient use of infrastructure, pollution, accidents (Vandenbulcke et al., 2008) and economic dependence on fossil fuels (Boussauw et al., 2013). The residential designations that facilitate these suburbanization processes are legally anchored in the zoning plans. In order to counter suburbanization and sprawl, which is one of the policy intentions of the RSV, it would be expected to remove the most isolated undeveloped residential areas from the zoning plans and compensate these by a strategy of metropolitan compaction. Such a strategy can only be based on a set of fiscal instruments which are able to compensate disadvantaged land owners. The removal of legally anchored although undeveloped residential areas from the zoning plans is no subject of debate in the BRV process.

The surroundings of Brussels is a special case of this issue. Until the end of the nineties, the demographics of Brussels were characterized by shrinkage due to urban flight. Today however, the population of Brussels grows rapidly, at a rate of almost three percent per year (Boussauw et al., 2012). The real estate market reacts to the demographic pressure with numerous infill projects, usually in the form of construction of apartments, allowing a rapid increase of the population density in the capital. Given the small surface area of the Brussels region, and the restrictive policy towards residential development by the Flemish government in the fringe of Brussels, part of this urbanization pressure is diverted to Flemish and Walloon municipalities that are located farther away from Brussels. Although many European cities face the same problems, in Flanders there is no intention to develop a vision on controlled expansion of the metropolis into the adjacent Flemish territory, for example through transit-oriented-development. The BRV process provides no room for such a debate.

6.4 Commercial Siting

Since early 2005, the federal law on the licensing of new commercial sites is in force. This law, which is in Belgium known as the "Ikea-law" regulates the issuance of socio-economic

permits for businesses with a sales area of over 400 sqm. In 2009 the law was modified to be in line with the related European directive. Where licensing was under federal jurisdiction till 2004, the new law transferred the responsibility to municipal councils. Additionally, since 2009 authorities are no longer allowed to use arguments on commercial competition to justify permit refusals. On the other hand, aspects of urban planning, mobility and sustainable development may still be adduced. These provisions are rather ambiguous, and have led to more relaxed licensing compared to the situation in 2004. Today, municipalities use their authority to compete with the commercial estates of neighbouring municipalities. This increases the likelihood that peripheral shopping centres and hypermarkets will compete to the detriment of traditional small-scale retail activities. Since these are usually interwoven with the urban fabric of the centres of towns and villages, weakening urban structures and automobility expansion are expected as a result. In Wallonia, Lambotte and Devillet (2011, p. 68-70) show that the number of licenses issued, as well as the sales area in Wallonia has increased dramatically in the period after 2004. Moreover, stores that were licensed after 2004 are on average sited much further from the traditional centres and their existing retail establishments, and are less accessible by public transport. A striking example of a result of this legal modification is the planning and licensing of the shopping and leisure complex Uplace, which will develop from 2013 a commercial activity space of 200,000 sqm close to the Brussels ring road. It is expected to become a serious threat to retail activities in almost all neighbouring town centres including Brussels, while impacts in terms of mobility and urban renewal may be called unsustainable. However, this controversial issue too is not part of the BRV process.

6.5 Property Registry

In Belgium, the property registry, or cadastre, is in principle intended to register owners of land and buildings and to collect property taxes. As such, it has since long been administered by the federal ministry of finance. The basis of the Belgian cadastre is an estimate of the nominal rental value of the considered property (land or building) with 1975 as a reference year. Although this estimate is indexed every year and after major renovations or for new constructions the estimate is usually up to date, this virtual cadastral income is a very blunt way of valuation. Large parts of the Belgian property assets are taxed based on the land value in 1975, not taking into account phenomena such as urban flight, suburbanization, gentrification and associated processes of degradation and upgrading of neighbourhoods. Nor is the cadastral income diversified based on objectives from policy areas other than state finances, such as spatial planning or urban redevelopment.

Although this situation seems illogical and perhaps counterproductive, it can perfectly be explained from the current structure of the Belgian state. The cadastre administration has not been included in one of the federal state reforms, while the taxes that are based on the valuation by this federal administration are collected by the municipalities and by the Flemish regional government. This means that the federal minister responsible for the cadastre has little interest in modernizing this administration, nor in diversifying the duties of the cadastre. It is clear, however, that adding some variability to the cadastral income could turn it into a particularly effective leverage instrument in urban redevelopment projects and other strategic interventions in spatial planning (Korthals-Altes, 2009).

7 IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

Although the aspects mentioned above are not exhaustive, and are selected based on the role they have played in media and political debates or in the academic literature, these examples show that the BRV process is less comprehensive and less underpinned than official communication suggests. Main flaws of the BRV process occur with regard to the following items:

- First, a number of strongly neo-liberally inspired and disputed developments in transport infrastructure and retail location policy are kept outside the process. These are developments and policies that are considered by the Flemish government as already decided, and consequently not open for discussion.
- Second, a number of legal and fiscal conditions that are determinant for the functioning of the land and property markets in Belgium are not questioned. However, it can be argued that a more steering policy cannot be implemented without customized property laws (Halleux et al., 2012; Alexander, 1992). Strong steering is an objective that emerges from the communication of the Green Paper, although this document does not discuss property rights.
- Third, the use of decision support systems simulating processes of urban economics, including traffic generation, is a priori excluded. This means that part of the existing academic knowledge in this area is not used, since this kind of technical knowledge is usually not present at the invited actors (Te Brömmelstroet and Bertolini, 2008; Vonk et al., 2005).
- Fourth, it is explicitly not the intention of the policy makers to include quantitative policy objectives in the plan. Since this approach may seriously undercut the measurability of the policy objectives, it becomes unlikely that politicians will ever be judged on their progress in implementing the plan (Talen, 1996). The fact that some of the few quantitative objectives of the RSV were after seven years adjusted downwards, suggests that the impact of the new plan will be small. Besides, in the Green Paper, preliminary policy objectives are drafted based on abundant use of metaphors. Although this approach has its value in facilitating expressions in stakeholder meetings (Palmer and Dunford, 1996), it is doubtful whether it makes sense to formulate policy objectives in a way that is highly susceptible to interpretation. This working method contributes to the perception that spatial planning is first and foremost about writing woolly policy texts, a reputation that may have been imported in Flanders in the 1990s, together with the, at that time contemporary, Dutch planning practice (Vermeijden, 2001).

But perhaps more importantly and also conditionally for the above-mentioned flaws, the BRV process seems to evolve into a highly introspective endeavour working on a reality that is constructed by a select group of involved actors. Although the BRV process is communicated as a collaborative and even coproductive process according to recent views of (radical) participatory planning, a number of key stakeholders are not present. Based on the trichotomy of civil society, business society and government (Boelens, 2010), it becomes clear which groups are not or under-represented:

- Civil society: those grassroots action committees that are organized around key spatial and infrastructural dossiers, but are not part of the officially subsidized natural and environmental associations.
- Business society: the CEO's of major firms, employer organizations outside the sectors of construction, agriculture and small businesses, such as manufacturing, service industry, energy-suppliers etc.
- Government: the federal government, the regional authorities of the Brussels and Walloon Region, adjoining neighbouring governments and major local authorities.

Moreover, even adjoining departments within the Flemish government are hardly involved or concerned with the on-going planning process. As a result major discussions and decisions about on-going investment programmes, even those with a significant spatial impact, are missed within the BRV-process. Interestingly, as such parallel processes do occur, in which the important public, civic and entrepreneurial stake- and shareholders mentioned above exchange their interests more directly with the politicians and civil servants involved, without losing their time in extensive holistic or integrative processes of coproduction. In this way the

BRV process does not only losses touch with some of the major discussions at hand, but also ignores the evolving complexity of our times. Since the process appears to be self-fulfilling in itself, it may become no longer of relevance to an ever broader part of the Flemish society.

However, developing an alternative process architecture that would satisfy the raised expectations, is not an easy task. The implementation in the Flemish context of a process structure that was mainly inspired from Dutch policy seems to clash with fundamentally different views on property structure and public authority competences, and with the complex federal structure of Belgium (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1999). However, also in foreign societies traditional planning instruments do not seem to work anymore, and have given rise to a profound reorganisation of the planning system itself in reference to the on-going fragmentations, volatility and complexity of the issues at hand. In the neighbouring Netherlands, some politicians even seem to be jealous of the situation in Belgium, as a country that is much less densely law settled as their own (Schultz Van Haagen, 2011). Hence and instead of continuously referring to planning systems in familiar countries, the solution may be sought in the development of a planning discourse that takes into account the specific historical, legal, institutional and cultural complexity of the Flemish-Belgium perspective itself. This could be done by embracing, instead of defying, complexity, including its apparent non-linearities and paradoxes. Referring to recent innovations in sociology, economics and political sciences (Boschma and Martin, 2011; Teisman et al., 2009), perhaps co-evolution, instead of coproduction, would be a way to proceed, evolving with upcoming and self-reliant processes in society and governance towards more resilient “ways of becoming” in mutually complex adaptive processes. Instead of holistic or integrating strategies towards overall visions and plans, Flemish planners could perhaps co-evolve in specific items, themes and questions to improve resilient decision making and added value outcomes. These alternative opportunities are not easy to execute on short notice. But given the many aspects that are kept explicitly outside the process by the Flemish Government, or that are falling under different policy level competences, an early trajectory that would involve leading stakeholders and policy makers at all relevant levels of government, including the federal level, the neighbouring regional and major local levels, may be a good way forward. Moreover, given the number of parallel trajectories and discussions about particular projects with a major effect on the spatial dynamics of Flanders in general, it might be a more efficient way to connect to these trajectories more intensively. Today, however, the BRV process is conducted in an unsuited context, making it primarily a communications and public relations tool, that is used to deliver an aura of sustainability optimism to on-going decision making.

8 CONCLUSION

In the Flemish region, spatial planning has only recently emerged into a full-fledged policy area, and proved to be one of the competences in which the young Flemish administration could plunge itself with great enthusiasm, in the wake of the various Belgian state reforms. However, the ambitious Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (RSV) could only make true part of the high expectations, and the development of an overarching spatial policy remained overshadowed by numerous obstacles that were located in other policy areas and at other government levels. It took seven years before the weaknesses of the newly developed spatial policy were to a certain extent recognized by the partial revision of the RSV in 2004, although this did not contribute to the credibility and effectiveness of the plan.

The insight that Flemish spatial planning had not yet acquired the maturity, the competence and the societal support of its Dutch counterpart and great example does not prevent the development of the new BRV to continue on the same course. Nevertheless, the working papers of this process are very metaphorical in nature, quantitative analyses and objectives are a priori excluded from the planning process, a number of governmental and non-

geovernmental actors are hardly recognized, and a range of neo-liberally inspired infrastructure projects and on-going developments, including the institutionalized suburbanization and the rapid growth of the Brussels conurbation, are kept out of the discussion. This gives little reason to believe that the soaring expectations that are created by the communication strategy of the BRV process will be able to be redeemed.

It appears that the Flemish planning project has so far been unable to take an overarching position in society, and the BRV which is currently being drafted will perhaps initiate little change in this. The reason for this discrepancy between the ambitions of the planning process and current and future developments in the field are likely to be explained by the observation that the imported Dutch model is not adapted to the Flemish-Belgian context, which contains important differences in legal, institutional and cultural aspects.

Consequently, the way in which current planning processes are conducted today leaves considerable room for improvement. Developing an own planning discourse adapted to the regional context, putting the stress less on holistic visioning but rather on particular aspects that clearly lend themselves to decision-making, selecting stakeholders based on their ability to take independent views, and organizing negotiations on a co-evolutionary basis, are all elements that may contribute and will perhaps help to live up at least part of the huge expectations raised by the BRV process.

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